

Carlos Slim's idea for a three-day working week

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

What is the average retirement age in your country? And in your field of work?

On average, how many hours a week do people work in your country? And in your field of work?

2 Key words

Match key words from the text to the definitions. The section numbers are given to help you.

1. a sudden very good idea _____ (introduction)
2. the positive aspect of something _____ (introduction)
3. a general principle or belief that affects the way that people behave _____ (introduction)
4. changes in something, for example in someone's ideas or opinions _____ (introduction)
5. careful or nervous about something because you think it might cause a problem _____ (introduction)
6. organizations in particular areas or cities that are responsible for providing public services _____ (two words, section 1)
7. a country's government departments and the people who work in them _____ (two words section 1)
8. be liked or wanted _____ (section 1)
9. groups of people with the skills for doing a particular type of job _____ (two words, section 2)
10. made something easier _____ (section 2)
11. a period of work time in a factory, hospital or other place where some people work during the day and some work at night _____ (section 3)
12. do a lot of activities in a short time _____ (two words, section 6)
13. describing jobs that involve using physical strength or skill rather than working in an office _____ (two words, section 6)
14. possible or likely to succeed _____ (section 6)

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Would Carlos Slim's three-day working week actually be workable?

Billionaire's brainwave would see employees work longer hours and fewer days for more years – but would they gain?

Phillip Inman and Angela Monaghan
23 July, 2014

When the world's second richest person has a brainwave he believes could make everyone better off, the world listens. Recently, Carlos Slim, a Mexican telecoms billionaire worth \$72bn, called for a global three-day working week. The upside is twice as much leisure time; the downside is longer days and workers carrying on into their 70s.

It is a work-hard, play-hard ethic that many of the world's billionaires might subscribe to but it would be a huge change for most workers and their employers.

Yet, there are shifts going on in the UK labour market that show Slim might be onto something – we're seeing more flexible working and more part-timers.

Unions might be wary but technology, increases in life expectancy and cost pressures from commuting and soaring house prices are all encouraging a more flexible approach to work.

We asked experts to tell us whether Slim's vision for a three-day working week could work – and what its impact would be.

1 **David Kern** Chief Economist, British Chambers of Commerce

It's a very interesting idea. In many professions, it would be possible – in creative businesses, among consultants and accountants, for example. But it could be damaging in those areas where you have a lot of people working with the public; for example, local authorities and the civil service. Some workers would be happier and more productive but, for others, working 11 hours a day would not appeal.

A working week of 33 hours would be a major decline in the number of hours worked, creating a big hole, and I don't think productivity would increase enough to compensate. It's too extreme to jump from the current situation to a three-day working week. It is worth exploring how people's working time might be reorganized but small businesses would find it very difficult to organize themselves in such a way.

2 **Sir Ian Cheshire** Chief Executive, Kingfisher

The idea of a three-day week is, in principle, interesting, as part of a wider trend in the workplace to much more flexible patterns of working to suit lifestyles, older workers, multiple job holders and career re-entry.

Companies should look at this as a way of tapping into talent pools that they can't attract with old-style five-day weeks and technology has facilitated this massively.

The only issue for businesses like ours will be maintaining teamwork and consistent customer service when teams are not always together but leadership businesses that adapt to this new reality will get the best talent.

3 **Paul Sellers** Policy Officer, TUC (Trades Union Congress)

It chimes with what people want in the UK – not necessarily a three-day week but more flexibility in where and when they work. While there are many people underemployed, some people are overemployed and would prefer to work fewer hours.

For us, the big question is 'What do people want?' and the idea that we'd all go to a three-day week is perhaps not what most people would want. Working anything more than 12 hours a day on a regular basis is getting into unhealthy territory. For some people, it would mean moving to a shift pattern, which could have a social impact, cutting people off from their circle, including family.

4 **Mike Emmott** Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

Carlos Slim is right that people should carry on working into their 70s. It can be a positive development for many people, especially if they are interested in their work and want to maintain their work-related social life.

Long days are not necessarily bad. It depends on the scheduling and how people work, like when they take breaks and the support they receive. There are already lots of people working five days' worth of hours in only four days. It saves travelling every day.

There is the risk that people will work three long days but still monitor their emails and smartphones on the other days, stretching their working week.

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5 Philip Booth Institute of Economic Affairs

Work patterns are incredibly varied compared with 30 years ago. Ultimately, such things are an outcome of the diverse and subjective preferences of employees and of the benefits to employers of different approaches to organizing work. If employees would prefer to work 12 hours a day for three days rather than seven hours for five days, employers would offer that option. If it doesn't affect productivity, they would get better employees for a given level of wages.

But it is not clear why employees should want their leisure in bigger chunks. It sounds like a childcare nightmare. Many of the 4.5 million self-employed can already decide how to organize their time. For the rest, let's leave it to employers and employees to sort it out.

6 John Philpott thejobseconomist.org

Carlos Slim obviously thinks a slim working week suits his businesses but not everyone will agree. Lots of people are already working overtime for free and this could make that situation worse.

If an employee can reorder their work and cram their productivity into three days, then it would be fine, but, if they can't, their wages would go down and they would be effectively paying for the extra leisure time.

It could suit a professional or a researcher who can get their job done over 12 hours without additional pressures but, in blue-collar jobs, extending the day may not be feasible. And a worker who deals with customers all day is going to be exhausted by the end of their shift.

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3 Comprehension check

Discuss the answers to these questions according to the information given in the article. Add any further thoughts and ideas of your own.

1. What four aspects of modern-day life might encourage a more flexible approach to work?
2. Who might a three-day week suit, according to Sir Ian Cheshire?
3. How might a three-day week affect teamwork and customer services?
4. How might employees (unintentionally) stretch their working week beyond three days?
5. What negative social repercussions might arise from a three-day week?
6. What jobs and professions might a three-day week suit?
7. What jobs and professions could encounter problems if a three-day week were introduced?

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4 Phrasal verbs

- Complete the gaps in 1 to 6 with the correct words.
 - Match the phrasal verbs with their meanings a to f. Then, find them in the article.
 - Use the phrasal verbs in sentences of your own.
- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. subscribe _____ something | a. be similar to or agree with someone else's ideas, plans, feelings etc |
| 2. be _____ something | b. agree with an idea |
| 3. tap _____ something | c. make arrangements for something to happen or decide how it will happen |
| 4. chime _____ something | d. use or get some benefit from something |
| 5. cut people _____ from something / someone | e. have information that will help you make an important discovery, decision etc |
| 6. sort something _____ | f. stop someone having a close or friendly relationship with another person |

5 Discussion

- What kind of work contract do you have?
- How flexible are your working hours?
- Would you be able to work from home? Why? Why not?
- Do you check work emails outside your working hours?
- Describe your ideal working week.
- Can you imagine working until you are 70 or 75 years old? Why? Why not?
- The six experts quoted in the article are all men. Is this significant?

6 Writing

Either

- Interview another student using the questions in Task 5 plus any more you'd like to ask. Then, write a text of approximately 120 words, similar to those in the article, stating their name, position and opinion.
- or*
- Write your own comments in the style of the article, as though adding a further expert opinion to the six you have read.

7 Webquests

Find out more about Carlos Slim.

If Slim is the world's second richest person, who is the richest?

Read a short article written immediately after Carlos Slim made his statement.

<http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/jul/21/carlos-slim-calls-for-three-day-working-week-to-improve-quality-of-life>

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KEY

2 Key words

1. brainwave
2. upside
3. ethic
4. shifts
5. wary
6. local authorities
7. civil service
8. appeal
9. talent pools
10. facilitated
11. shift
12. cram into
13. blue-collar
14. feasible

3 Comprehension check

1. technology; increases in life expectancy; the cost of commuting; rapidly increasing house prices
2. older workers; people who have more than one job; people getting back into work after a break
3. It may be difficult to work effectively as a team when team members are not always together. As a result, customer services might become inconsistent. Workers who deal with customers would be exhausted by the end of their shift.
4. by checking their emails and smartphones on the days when they are not working
5. problems with childcare; being cut off from family and friends;
6. creative businesses, e.g. consultants and accountants; professionals; researchers
7. people working with the public, e.g. local authorities and civil service employees; blue-collar workers; people in customer services

4 Phrasal verbs

- a.**
1. to
 2. onto
 3. into
 4. with
 5. off
 6. out
- b.**
1. b
 2. e
 3. d
 4. a
 5. f
 6. c

Teacher's note

A possible extension to this task is to ask your students what happens to the meanings of the phrasal verbs if you change the particles. For example, *cut up*, *cut down*, *cut off*. (Changing the particle changes the meaning of the phrasal verb.)

5 Discussion

Teacher's note: Although aimed primarily at employees, people not currently working should also be able to answer these questions. They could think about their last job, a job they are hoping to get, their ideal job or even their partner's job. If you have students who are looking after children and managing their household instead of going out to work, ask how the three-day week would affect their lives.